Ready for the

By LCdr. W. Scott Butler

"OK, here comes the burner signal. Pluggin' 'em in. There's 1…2…3…4…5. OK, engines look good. Are you ready?" asked my newly-minted pilot, recently arrived from his initial carrier qualification at VF-101.

"Sure am. Let's go flyin'," I responded, pumped to launch from the deck of USS *Enterprise*. This was the first time he had launched from the boat as part of a fleet F-14 squadron, and my first night-carrier launch in four years. Still, I had nearly 200 night launches from the carrier under my belt, and he already had demonstrated he was a strong ball flyer. We had talked about every contingency—or so we thought.

"Here come the lights. He's pushing the button. Here's the stroke."

It was a flawless launch into less-than-flawless weather. We were among the last aircrew to finish the CQ phase of an eight-day, integrated-ship exercise known as an independent-steaming exercise. Although primarily designed as an opportunity for ship's company to become proficient in their duties, it also provided a chance for Carrier Air Wing Eight to perform routine cyclic operations for the first time since leaving USS *Theodore Roosevelt*.

"103, airborne," I called, as we flew into the darkness.

"Hey, I think I've really got something here," remarked the pilot. He calmly proceeded to tell me that after raising the gear handle and hitting the master-reset button to clear a nuisance flap light, he still had a launch-bar light. Several things can cause this light in the F-14, none of which aid landing on the carrier. Although this was by no means a time- or flight-critical emergency, a launch bar that remains down after a

launch could lead to a tricky recovery later on. And it was one thing we hadn't really talked about before our first flight together.

Looking over his left shoulder, I could see the indicator showing our landing gear safely up and locked. That was good news, provided we could get the gear to go down safely. Now we had to figure out how to get them down.

We talked to a squadron representative and described our situation while continuing to climb. Leveling at 10,000 feet to remain in clear airspace, we circled overhead the ship and talked through our options.

After a brief discussion with our rep, the pilot lowered the gear handle, which safely brought down our landing gear. One of the primary concerns with a launch-bar light is that the nose gear may be cocked, preventing it from locking into place for a safe landing. Once we had indications all three were down and locked in place, we felt better, although the continued presence of the light indicated the launch bar still might be down. This would keep us from landing normally. The darkness and the marginal weather prevented any chance of another aircraft checking our situation, so we left, wondering where we might go. Although we had plenty of gas, the weather was miserable at every divert, and we were not eager to press into unknown conditions in an aircraft with potentially bad gear.

The squadron just had completed an orange-air detachment in the humid conditions of Pensacola, Fla. The first days of the detachment aboard *Enterprise* had been filled with torrential downpours, soaking the electronics of our gracefully aging aircraft. Our beloved Fast Eagle 103 is the oldest production Tomcat still flying, and, on this night, she seemed to be showing her age. We talked about the possibility the light merely could be an electronic glitch from moisture or age. Our PCL was clear; if we had the

Photos by Matthew Thomas
Photo composite

light, we had to assume it was valid until proven otherwise.

Our commanding officer coordinated a flyover of the ship for us so the LSOs could shine a beacon on our nosegear and determine its condition. We completed the flyover and the LSOs reported the launch bar appeared to be up. They were willing to try to bring us onboard.

Again, our PCL was clear. With a launch-bar light during carrier operations, even without secondary indications confirming unsafe gear, aircrew are directed to divert, if possible. In our case, we were less than 100 miles from the Virginia coast, and this seemed to be the clear choice. Despite the LSO's best intentions, the skipper quoted our NATOPS and sent us on a divert to NAS Norfolk, where the weather marginally was better than our home base at NAS Oceana.

We had been hoarding our fuel and still were carrying plenty of gas. We also felt the proper decisions were being made by all, but we were concerned by the deteriorating weather conditions at each divert. In fact, the diverts listed during our preflight briefing proved not to be legal, but we felt with good control and calm, professional aviating, we would be able to hack it.

The return was uneventful, with the controlling agencies providing courteous treatment to our emergency Tomcat. En route to Norfolk, we discussed every contingency: the missed approach and waveoff procedures, the desirability of a minimum-rate-of-descent landing, the need to take an arrested landing, and, in the event we missed the gear, the need to hold the nose gear up for as long as possible after touchdown to minimize the chance for a gear problem. Finally, we discussed whether to stay with the jet if we missed the arresting gear and found ourselves with damaged landing gear on a wet runway, or if the plane left the runway.

When we finally made our approach, the weather had dropped to barely acceptable minimums. Fortunately, we saved enough gas for two approaches into NAS Norfolk before requiring a true bingo divert to MCAS Cherry Point. The weather at Cherry Point was described as miserable but was rumored to be getting better.

We broke out of the weather and acquired the runway environment just before reaching our missed-approach altitude. The pilot gently set down the Tomcat, just missing the short-field gear, and we began our roll to the end of a very wet runway.

Applying increasing pressure on the brakes with 3,000 feet of runway to go, we felt a strong thump below the jet. We were unsure if we had blown the carrierized tires or if the launch bar had popped the nose gear. We slowed as the emergency trucks rolled out to greet us, and we came to a stop at the very end of runway 10. It seems we had caught the long-field gear—a good thing, or we would have rolled into a lake.

Although this flight ended without any serious problems, several issues were discussed that night and the following day. It was obvious we had not been prepared for several contingencies, although we were confident everything was covered before the first flight.

We agreed with the wisdom of sending us to a divert field, despite the willingness of the LSOs to catch us and our belief the real problem was in the electrical system and not the launch bar. Although this proved to be the case, taking a trap aboard the carrier would have been a NATOPS violation and would have been hard to explain if something had gone wrong.

We needed to keep options open throughout the emergency. Our situation was not time-critical, and the open discussions with our squadron rep and CO allowed us to think through their advice and to analyze our decisions. We agreed that the divert was the right thing to do, but were, at first, hesitant to proceed to NAS Norfolk. Although the weather was above legal requirements for landing, it was below legal-divert minimums and could have presented some serious problems had our fuel state been different.

As the mission commander, I had overall responsibility for the safe recovery of our jet—a role of which I became ever more acutely aware as one decision led to the next. All the good advice in the world would have been irrelevant if I had allowed us to make poor decisions.

LCdr. Butler flew with VF-41.